

Tracts in America 59

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L E T T E R

FROM

W. K. Esq.

TO

W. WILBERFORCE, Esq.

L O N D O N :

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M.DCC.XC.



A

LETTER, &c.

SIR,

A NEW Edition of three little Tracts which I drew up twenty-two years ago, at the desire of the late Archbishop Secker, being now called for, I conceive there is a peculiar propriety in my addressing them to you, who appear to be actuated by similar principles to those which dictated them, in your endeavours to serve that unhappy class of our fellow-creatures, whose present comfort and future felicity were the objects of the second and third.

Had that excellent prelate lived to receive the latter one, I have no doubt he would have prevailed with Government to take some steps towards promoting the regulations I therein proposed ; but neither his immediate successor, nor any of the other members of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, to whom copies were delivered, judged the matter, I presume, of sufficient importance to take up the consideration of it ; and I had the mortification to find the rulers of the State were as little disposed to be active on the poor Negroes' account, as the governors of the Church ; although when I came into office, I presented a copy to each of them ; but I very much doubt if any of them ever took the pains to read it : for I have always found Ministers of State as careful to avoid trouble, as the Ministers of the Gospel are earnest in their prayers, for *Peace in their time.*

The mode you pursued was therefore, I am well persuaded, the only one which could have forced the consideration of the subject upon either ; and you have not only succeeded in engaging them both,
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but the Opposition also, and the whole nation in a good degree, in behalf of the wretched descendants of Ham.

The ground upon which the inquiry was adopted does all the parties the greatest credit: for what could be more honourable for the representatives of a commercial people than the declaration, that whatever trade was not honest in its principle ought not to be pursued, however lucrative it might be in its produce?

What instance of deference to that fundamental maxim of all jurisprudence, *Fiat Justitia ruat Cælum*, did ever the leaders of Administrations or of Oppositions give equal to the sacrifice of a trade, which takes off 200,000*l.* value of their country manufactures? Of colonies that consumed to the amount of 1,200,000*l.* more, and that furnished the means of extracting a revenue of 1,500,000*l.* to the single consideration of its injustice? Or when did the landed and monied interests in the House of Commons so cheerfully unite in depriving the stockholders of so large a part of their security, as an income of 1,500,000*l.* per annum, and in laying the foundation of an additional three
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shillings in the pound land tax to make good the deficiency in the public revenue, which it was probable might be the consequence of this sacrifice to justice and humanity ?

I am aware that other motives than those which I have assigned, have been imputed to the actors in this philanthropic scene, and that fanaticism and the popularity of the measure are supposed to have had the greatest influence over them : but surely, when men are acting in direct and palpable contradiction to their public and private interests, it is unfair not to allow them to be actuated by the conscientious motives they avow. But however much I approve the principle and applaud the disinterested benevolence of the measure, I do not wish to see so much philanthropy exerted at so great an expence to the public, if the same good can be done in a manner less injurious to the trade and finances of the kingdom ; and it is to suggest some ideas of that nature that I have solicited your attention, as I sincerely believe you have undertaken this business with the purest and most upright intentions, and will be well pleased to see any means pointed out by which the temporal
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and spiritual welfare of the negroes may be promoted and secured at a less expence than the total abolition of the African trade, and the dereliction of the West-India Colonies.*

As the negroes, whoever was their progenitor, must be allowed to be the creatures of the same Creator with the whites, I cannot suppose but that they are equally his care, and entitled to the same immortality and salvation ; and if that be so, it is surely the duty of all Christians, as states, societies, and individuals, to endeavour to instruct them in the knowledge and will of their Creator ; for to know his will, and to obey it, must ever be the primary, if not the sole object of attention with immortal beings, and upon that principle ought every political society to be founded, and by it ought the propriety of every political institution or regulation to be tried. I will not,

* I have purposely avoided the application of the term slave to the negroes in our Colonies, as that term in common acceptation means such as have no legal rights, but are at the absolute will and disposal of their owner or master ; whereas the planter has neither property in, or power over the negroe, but such as the laws of the Colony give him.

however, proceed to annalize the British constitution upon this principle, lest I should be led to anticipate what I intend to be the subject of a future publication.

The first question, therefore, which I conceive we ought to put to ourselves, is, what are the best and most probable means of instructing the Africans in the knowledge and will of their Creator? And the next, how those means may be employed, so as to promote their temporal advantage in concurrence with their spiritual welfare?

It is some ages since the people of England became acquainted with the peninsula of Africa, and many years since our government have made establishments upon its Western coast. If, then, we inquire what has our catholic state, our triumphant church, or our Christian people done towards instructing the ignorant and savage Africans in the knowledge and will of our common Creator, we shall find, that the sum total of our endeavours will be no more than the bringing a single young negroe from Cape Coast, and educating him in England at the expence of the Society for propagation of the Gospel, ordaining and sending him

him back to his relations as a missionary, with a salary of 50l. per ann. of which there is contributed by the Bishops alone the sum of 5l. 17s. which is equal to 4s. 6d. each, towards the instruction and salvation of the whole people of Africa. Yet, small as this sum is, it is *all the money* more than either the British Government or the East India Company contributes to the instruction of the 20 millions of Asiatics, from whom the former derives a rent-charge of 400,000l. and thrice that sum in duties; and the latter extracts a revenue of 4 or 5 millions. Now can it be imagined, that the excellent prelates who have governed our church ever since our settlements took place on the coast of Africa, would have made no greater efforts for the salvation of the natives, if they had not been fully persuaded, it was impracticable to give them any religious instruction in their own country? I have, therefore, the unanimous testimony of all the governors of our church for two centuries, to support my opinion, that the first step to be taken towards the instruction of the Africans is, to transport them out of their country.

To carry away such as are willing to go, cannot, I conceive, be liable to any objection, especially as the British Government has long permitted its own natural-born white subjects to be inveigled away in large numbers to America, without any pretence of their better instruction in religion, or that they cannot be properly taught the knowledge and will of their Creator in their own country. I shall, therefore, take it for granted, that to remove such of the natives of Africa to the British Colonies (as are willing to go) with a view to their better instruction in the Divine Will, without prejudice to their temporal welfare, is not only licit but laudable. The next inquiry, then, must be, whether any state or persons can acquire such a right over any individual, as to remove him out of his native country into another, without his own consent?

Here I should find it necessary to enter into a long discussion of the rights of men, if Mr. Burke had not, fortunately for me, and most happily for the public, precluded all farther investigation of the subject, by exposing the absurdity of founding the laws
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of society upon the supposed natural equality of man, when the very end and purpose of society is to counteract the *natural inequality* of men, an inequality which the Creator ordained, as it should seem, for the very purpose of forcing them into society, the condition for which they were created and adapted.* How far, therefore, a man can, and does subscribe his individual rights into the society of which he becomes a member, shall be the only object of my inquiry. That no man can give to another a right to exercise a power over him which he has not over himself, is an aphorism which I take the liberty to deny, upon the ground of the practice of all states there ever existed, for although no man can dispose of his own life, he can give the state he becomes

* The variety of the human face is to me a strong proof of the care of the Creator to remove any impediment to men's living in society which a similitude of countenance would certainly have been, and when the smallness of the features and the circumference of the face are considered, it is most wonderful that no two are to be found in the whole of the existing species so exactly alike as not to be distinguished from each other.

a subject of a right to take it away ; at least all states have assumed such a power, and if they did not, they could not exist : nor is another aphorism, that no man can be bound to a society to which he has never given his consent, more true in fact, as in every State the condition of the child is decided before he is born, and if he were to attempt to alter it, he would in many cases be severely punished for his presumption. Indeed, no Government could subsist, if it were optional in every individual of its members to dissolve or withdraw from it ; all Governments have therefore wisely determined by their practice, that the parent shall contract for the child, and nothing but the general inclination of the people, or the operation of force which pre-supposes that inclination, can justify disobedience to whatever Government a man lives under the protection of ; and we need not go to the despotic states of Africa for examples, as our own happy free country will furnish them abundantly : you, Sir, well know, that when a farmer takes a lease for three lives, he generally puts in the lives of two of his children with his own ; and you also know, that

that upon the death of the father, the children become answerable for the rent. Now let us drop our partiality to our own dear country and its liberty for a moment, and consider what is truly implied in this transaction.

In a fair bargain it is supposed that the farmer, by the industry of himself and family, and the employment of his property, can draw out of the ground a produce equal to three times the rent he pays for it; that is, in other words, he agrees to work for his landlord two days in every week, on condition of his permitting him to occupy a certain portion of his ground; and from the labour of the other four, he is to procure food and raiment for himself and all his family; and all casualties of sickness or bad weather, and other misfortunes, are to be placed to the account of his own four days, for his landlord must have his two whatever befall him. It is true, in case he chuses to be idle, his landlord has not the power to drive him into the field with a cow skin or cart whip, but he can do what is far more severe, he can shut him up for life in a cold prison. The option, then, that the farmer has in this land of liberty,

is to work or to rot in a gaol; and this very condition he has the right of entailing upon his sons, for the sons cannot get rid of the lease while they live, nor be discharged from the obligation of paying the rent, unless their landlord discharges them, that is, gives them their freedom, or they find a substitute, which the landlord will accept in their stead. Now is it so much greater a hardship upon the African, to be obliged to work the six days for a landlord, who not only furnishes him with the land, but finds him and his children in habitations, food, and cloaths, and takes care of them in sickness and old age, as well as in their infancy? or does the difference of the punishment which attends upon the idleness of either, argue any difference in the right of inflicting it? It is the laws of the country which authorises both kinds, and to those laws whites and blacks are equally bound to submit. What is the case of a free-born English sailor, forced into a service to which he never consented? Is he not flogged if he refuses to do the duty required of him? And are not our paupers in our workhouses punished if they refuse to do such work as is judged by the overseers suitable to their strength?

And

And upon what ground is it justified, but that of the power of the state over all its subjects.

I have been an owner of negroes in America, and I am a landholder in Wales, and I solemnly declare, were my Welch cottagers to offer themselves and their children to me upon the same footing as I held my negroes, and the laws permitted it, I would not accept them. The cottager I neither feed nor cloath, much less his wife and children.—(I am not now talking of what humanity or charity might dictate, but what the laws of England require and allow.)—I pay him wages only when he works, and in sickness and bad weather he is no charge upon me ; and when he is old and past his labour, I turn him over to his parish, and so get rid of him ; whereas, if he were upon the footing of my negroes, I must lodge, maintain, and cloath him and his family, in sickness and in health, foul days as well as fair, and take equal care of him in his old age as in his youth.

The difference, then, between the free-born Englishman and the negroe seems to be this, that the one is compelled to labour while he is able by the pinching of hunger,
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the shivering of cold, or the horrors of a gaol; and the other is forced to it when he is well fed and clothed, and in sound health, by the terrors of the cart whip. If we find so little difference between the condition of the present English cottagers and the negroes, what shall we say to the former villains or slaves of the feudal lords in this country, or in Russia or Poland, and the other European kingdoms, where the feudal system still prevails, and under which we see the tenants sold and transferred with the soil they cultivate? The African Princes, indeed, assume and exercise a still more despotic power over their subjects than did the feudal lords, however they may have come by it; for they put them to death in their own country, if such be their pleasure, or sell them to strangers out of it. But such is the constitution of their governments; and if that gives the princes a right or power to sell their subjects, I know not what should prevent our purchasing them upon the principle I first established, viz. that we do it with a view to better their condition; for that our religion does not oppose it, we have the authority of the venerable Society, expressed in the letter inserted

serted in the annexed Tracts, and drawn up by Archbishop Secker himself, though probably assisted by the present excellent Bishop of London, then one of his Grace's chaplains: and the legality of it is sanctioned by a variety of acts of Parliament, and the frequent grants of public money for the purpose of carrying it on.

The only points then to be determined are, whether the condition of the negroes is really bettered by their removal, or whether it may be made so? And here let our ministers of state and of the gospel take shame to themselves for their most unpardonable neglect of these poor creatures. I did what I could to awaken their attention to them, but in vain. You have raised a voice that must be heard; the nation is roused, and will not be quieted without a reform in our conduct towards them: but have a care that your zeal does not outrun discretion, for more mischief has been done to the best cause by the interference of zealots, than by the indolence of supine governors. We know the condition of the negroes to be most wretched in their own country—what means, let us ask ourselves, are in our power

to render it less so? Is there any practicable plan (and our governors both of church and state seem to think there is not) for amending the constitutions of their governments, and of instructing them in the knowledge and will of their Creator? These questions we ought to be able to answer satisfactorily to our consciences in the affirmative, before we prohibit their removal; for if we can devise no means of mending their condition in their own country, we are bound as men and Christians, to assist them in removing out of it into one where their present and future happiness will be better provided for.

No objection, I presume, would lie against our purchasing the devoted subjects of a tyrant in Africa, and setting them down as tenants upon estates in the West Indies, requiring only a stated rent in proportion to the value of the lands they occupied, at the same time providing for their spiritual welfare, by appointing schoolmasters and missionaries to instruct them in the knowledge and will of their Creator. Their removal, therefore, is not *under all circumstances* to be prohibited. But the purpose for which we

remove them, it is said, is to make them greater slaves to ourselves than they were to their princes : and if this be the fact, that purpose ought certainly to be changed, or the removal totally prohibited ; for I never did or can consider it lawful to purchase an African negroe, but with the sincere purpose of bettering his condition both here and hereafter, and with the full conviction, that we are doing so.

Upon this ground, then, let us try the cause, and compare the condition of the African negroe in his own country with what it is, or *may be made*, in the West Indies.

That the African governments are despotic throughout has been fully proved, with very few exceptions, and that their princes consider their subjects as their absolute property, and either butcher or sell them at their pleasure ; and that those which are brought to our factories for sale, are either prisoners taken in war, criminals, or debtors, or the property of the princes or great men, bred up for sale, has also been established by uncontrovertible evidence ; and as to the idle stories of kidnapp-

ping, or carrying off by violence, they have been so fully refuted, as to deserve no farther notice.

The manner of their transportation, and their treatment on board our Ships, has been found very reprehensible indeed ; and too much praise cannot be given to You and Sir William Dolben for the pains you have taken to bring it to light, nor to Mr. Pitt, for the expensive plan he so generously adopted for its prevention and remedy ; and I am clearly of opinion, that the removal of the African negroes from Africa to the West Indies, ought to be made in a manner as comfortable and salutary, as the removal of emigrants from Ireland and Scotland to America is rendered by the laws of the American States : and I particularly recommend to your attention, the last act passed in Pennsylvania for the purpose, as a model for the regulations of the transport of the African negroes.

The regulations enjoined by that act will, indeed, render the transport much more expensive than it has been ; but that circumstance ought not to be an objection to your adopting them, as it will operate beneficially
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for the negroes in Africa as well as in the Colonies, by obliging the traders to reduce the price in Africa, and to raise it in the Colonies. The effect of the one will be, to lessen the temptation to procure slaves by unjust means, and of the other, to render the planters more attentive to the offspring of those they already possess. Indeed the legislature of Jamaica have by their consolidated act passed in 1788, made such provisions for the temporal advantage of the negroes, as renders their condition in Jamaica, in that respect far preferable to what it is in Africa, and I should hope that act will be adopted by all the other Islands, as far as their different circumstances will admit, if it be recommended to them by Parliament, in a resolution of your committee.

The rendering their spiritual condition equally preferable, appears to be the only remaining object of attention ; and here too I am happy to be able to refer you to precedents, though sorry am I to say, that neither the governors of our church or state have furnished them, or given the smallest degree of support to those who have. What I mean, is, the example of the *Unitas fratrum* society,

society, commonly called Moravians, who have actually instructed, and continue to instruct, in the knowledge and will of God, upwards of 4000 negroes and people of colour in the Island of Antigua alone. Their method perfectly corresponds with that I pointed out in the third of these little tracts, which I now beg leave to put into your hand; and, indeed, I was fully informed of their plan at the time I drew it up, as I had one of their Missionaries residing upon my plantation in Georgia, who spared from his occupation of a carpenter, a sufficient portion of his time for the instruction of my negroes, and those of the neighbouring planters, who desired his visits.

Such are the only proper Missionaries to be employed in this work of indispensable duty, which is so solemnly bound upon the consciences of all our rulers in church and state, as well as upon the planters, by every precept of the Gospel, that our past neglect renders us unworthy of the name of Christians I shall hope, too, that the providing religious instructors for the negroes would lead our rulers to think a little of the religious state of the whites in the Colonies, to which
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they have been to the full as inattentive as to that of the negroes. When the lands in the ceded Islands were parcelling out for sale, I endeavoured to impress the then administration with some ideas of the propriety of allotting glebe lands in the several parishes, into which the French inhabitants had divided those Islands; but neither that, nor any other provision, was made, or has since been made, in any of them by government, for the regular service of Almighty God; and the Island of Dominica, which is divided into twelve parishes, has not a single clergyman at this day to officiate in any one of them: and yet we have the presumption to call ourselves a Christian people, and we boast, that our twenty-six most learned and excellent Prelates have seats in the upper House of Parliament, to superintend that great and essential object the religion of the State—But whatever be the regulations respecting the negroes in the colonies, I much fear they will have little effect, unless it be made the duty of some person unconnected with the Islands to see them duly observed. The negroes cannot know what the regulations are, nor whether they have the benefit of them, and if they did know them, to whom
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are they to complain, or by whom send their complaints of not enjoying them? an Intendant or Superintendant of the negroes ought, therefore, to be appointed in every Island, with authority and instructions to visit the plantations, and report his observations to the Governor, and if necessary prosecute delinquencies. These ideas, Sir, I have judged it proper to submit to your consideration before you resume the chair of the committee, you have given notice you propose to renew, after the holydays, and as they are the result of much experience and intimate acquaintance with the whole of the subject, and are suggested by one whose endeavours have long been exerted for the advantage of that unhappy race of men, whose cause you have lately pleaded with so much eloquence and pursued with so much ability and unre-mitted attention, he trusts you will receive them as the contribution of a fellow labourer, and as a testimony of the respect and esteem with which he has the honour to be,

SIR,

Your most obedient,

and faithful humble Servant,

W. K.

